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Johnnie Allen served in the Army and Air Force for 30 years and three wars. He earned two Bronze Stars, both for actions during the Vietnam War.

But he considers his work as superintendent for the Lake County Veterans Assistance Commission the most important job of his life.

“When you see a family without a home or without any income or any food, and you make it possible for that person to have a home ... and food on the table, that’s very important to me,” said Allen, 80, of Zion.

The liaison between local veterans and the often-intimidating U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for the past 16 years, Allen retired Friday.

Among his accomplishments was his successful fight to save the North Chicago VA medical center from closure, a battle that actually led to a multimillion-dollar expansion of the facility.

“Unlike a lot of other folks who were ground up by the VA bureaucracy, Johnnie didn’t give up,” said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, who allied with Allen to keep the hospital open. “He is probably the person most responsible for saving the North Chicago VA (hospital).”

Co-workers say Allen refused offers for a retirement party and tried to slip away without public fanfare. That didn’t surprise Kirk.

“Johnnie is like many men of the greatest generation,” said Kirk, himself a combat veteran who serves in the Navy Reserve. “They accomplish the job and don’t ask for the credit.”

Allen was drafted into the Army during World War II and then enlisted in the Army Air Corps, which eventually became the Air Force. He was stationed in Germany through the war and beyond.

He also saw combat in Korea and Vietnam, spending most of his military career in hospital administration.

After leaving the service, Allen worked for a Milwaukee architectural and engineering firm. He started working for veterans in the 1980s, first as a deputy service officer with Disabled American Veterans and then with Lake County's veterans commission.

He'll be replaced as superintendent of the commission by Michael Peck, a retired Army officer from Mundelein who served two tours in Vietnam.

Peck already has worked with veterans of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Allen believes that experience will serve him well in his new post.

"I feel very comfortable that he's going to be good," Allen said of his successor. "He brings a lot to the table."

Allen said he plans to relax "a little bit" in retirement and spend more time with his wife, Constance. He will remain in contact with the veterans office as a consultant.

The Lake County Board will honor Allen with a resolution commemorating his service during its monthly meeting Tuesday in Waukegan.

County Administrator Barry Burton praised Allen for helping thousands of local veterans. Allen's retirement, Burton said, "is certainly well deserved."